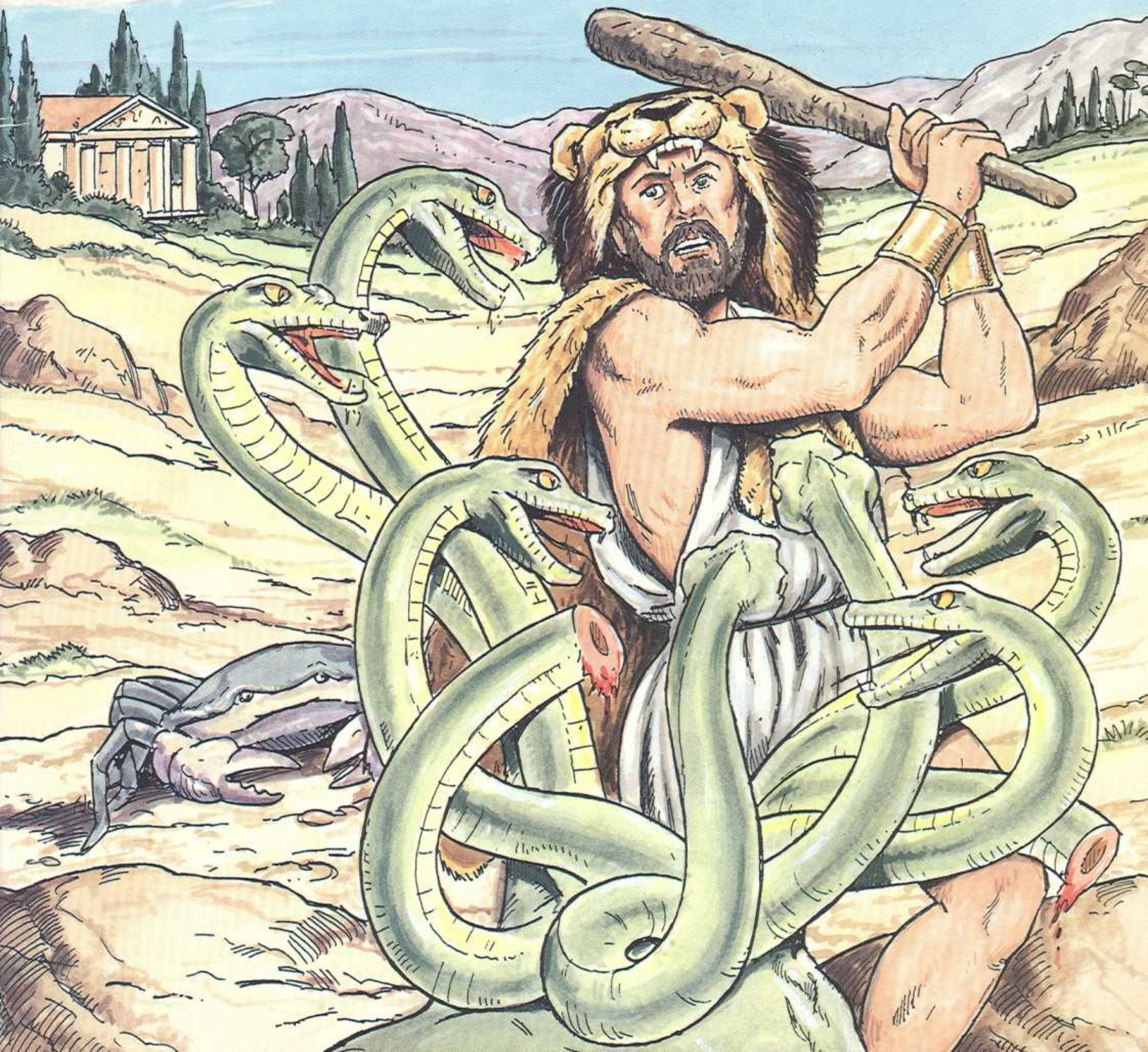
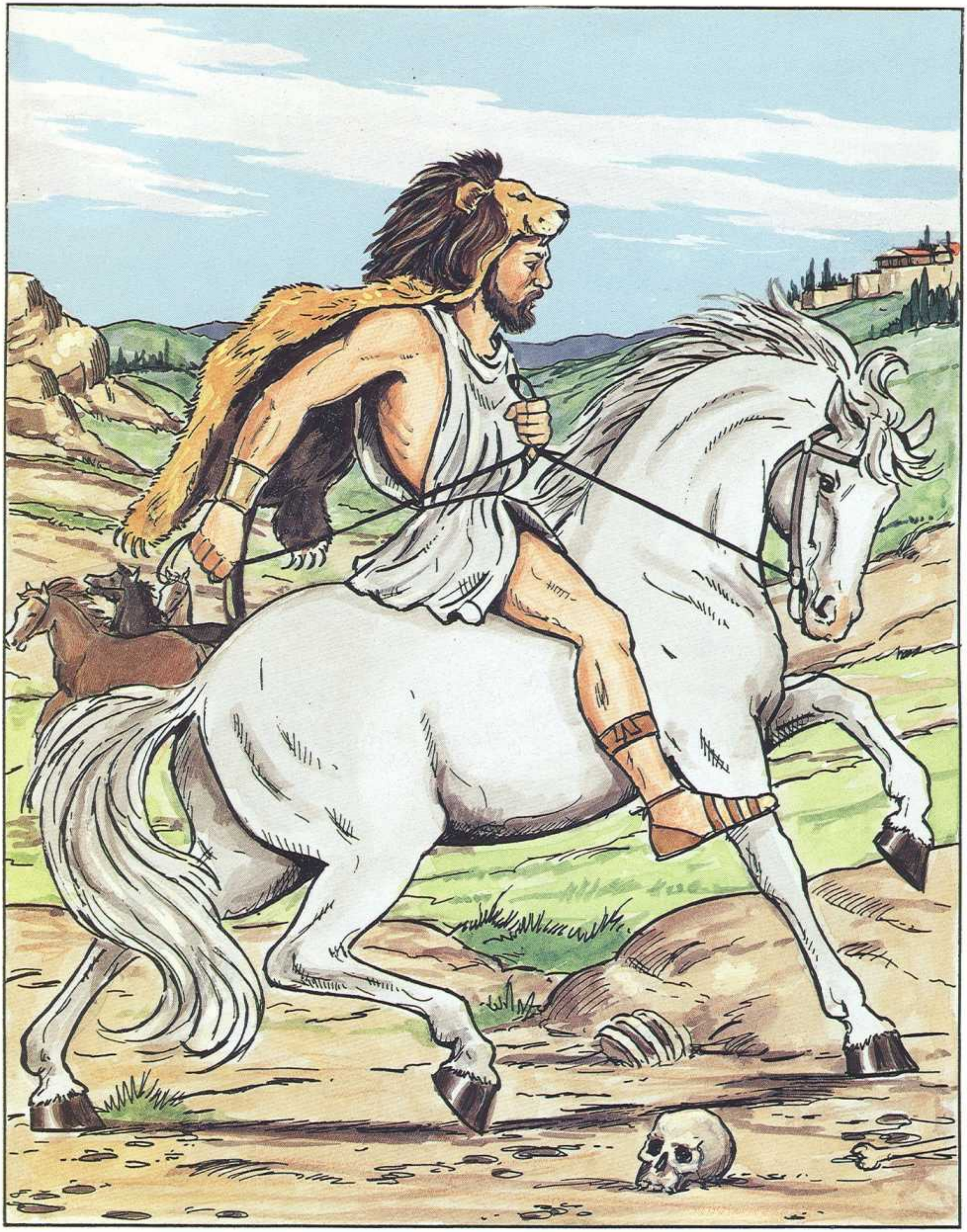
VISIT…

Dover Coloring Book

Adventures of HERCULES Coloring Book

Bob Blaisdell and John Green





Zeus was lord of all.

In ancient Greece, they told stories of gods and heroes and of how all things first came to be. Zeus was lord of all. He kept his power over his fellow gods by the use of his wits and flashing lightning bolts. Those who disobeyed him paid a dear price.

He enjoyed the worship of mortals, but he also in return admired many mortals. One such mortal was the wife of Amphitryon, beautiful Alcmene, princess of Thebes and daughter of King Creon.

One evening she was awaiting her husband's return from the war when Zeus flew down from his palace above the clouds on Mount Olympos. Zeus appeared to Alcmene in Amphitryon's form, and thus he became the father of her son, Hercules. Amphitryon, returning home the next night, became the father of Hercules' twin, Iphicles. Amphitryon considered Hercules also as his own.

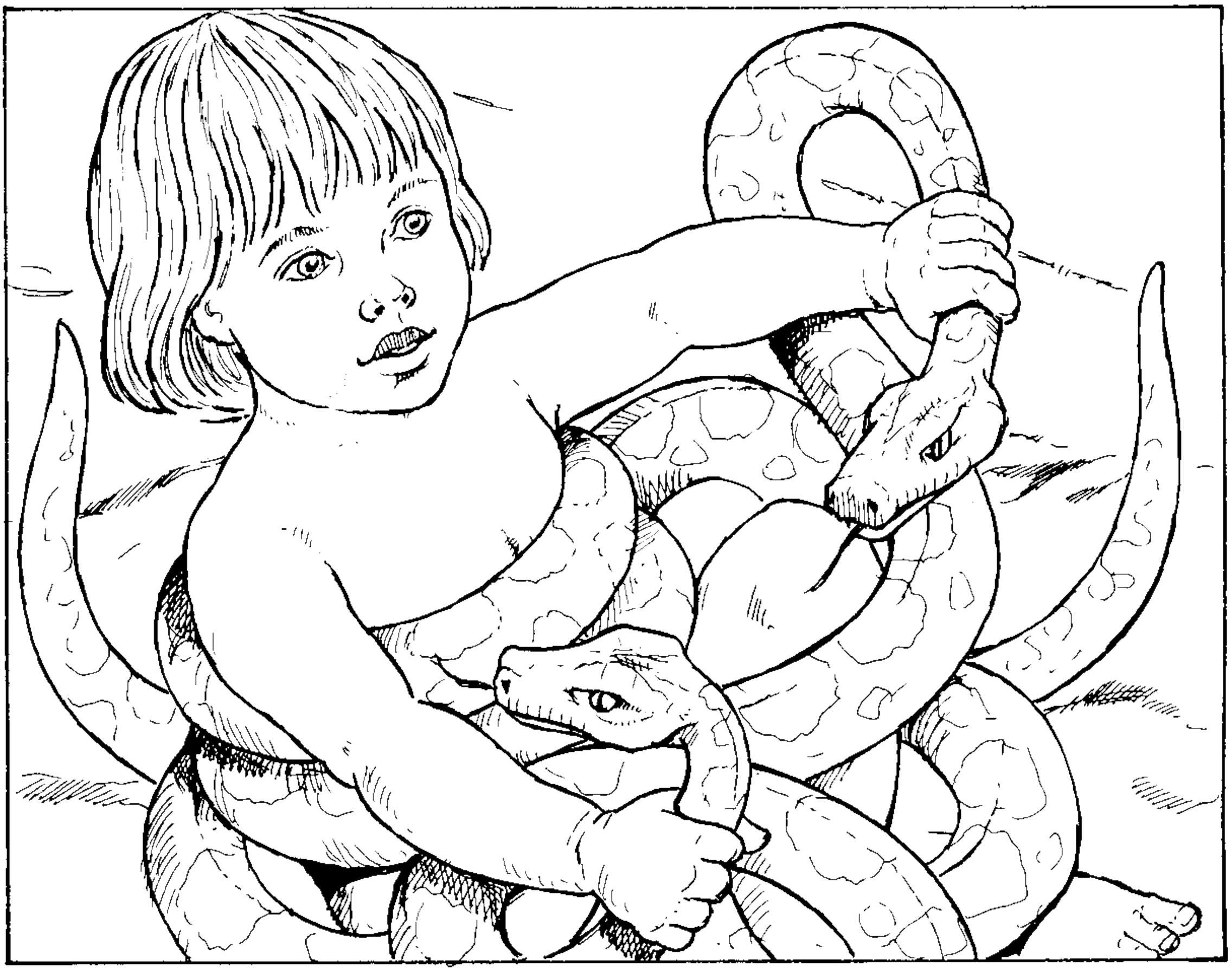
Even as a baby Hercules, who became known as the strongest man who ever lived, showed his wonderful strength. Lying in his crib one evening, next to Iphicles, the infant awoke to a hissy, slithery sound.

Hercules sat up, not in fright but in fascination, and peered into the darkness. Suddenly, two sets of gleaming red gems rose above the edge of the crib.

Hercules poked at the eyes (for this was what they were) and laughed! The heads darted back a moment, then wiggled and waggled, hissing and staring at the fierce creature. Then the serpents (yes, two gigantic snakes) streamed over the edge and into the crib.

What fun! thought the baby. But the cool, brawny, smooth snakes quickly wrapped themselves around him, while helpless Iphicles slept on. Their forked tongues fluttered within giggling Hercules' ears, which meant, should he survive their visit, he would sometimes have the gift of foresight. When, however, they began to squeeze their prey, just as smaller snakes would have squeezed a mouse or rat, Hercules cried out in surprise. They coiled tighter around the baby, who, with a little gasp, wrapped one of his soft, strong hands around each snake's meaty throat. Squeeze was answered for squeeze, and in a few moments the serpents, not the baby, lost their breath and lay dead in the crib.

As a boy he had many wise teachers, including fatherly Amphitryon, who taught him the art of driving a chariot behind fleet-footed horses. Thanks to Autolycos and Eurytos he became, in short order, a masterful wrestler and archer. But Hercules had a quick, fiery temper, and when he made a mistake with his bow and arrow, for instance, he seemed possessed by an evil spirit, and would break the hardwood bow across his knee.



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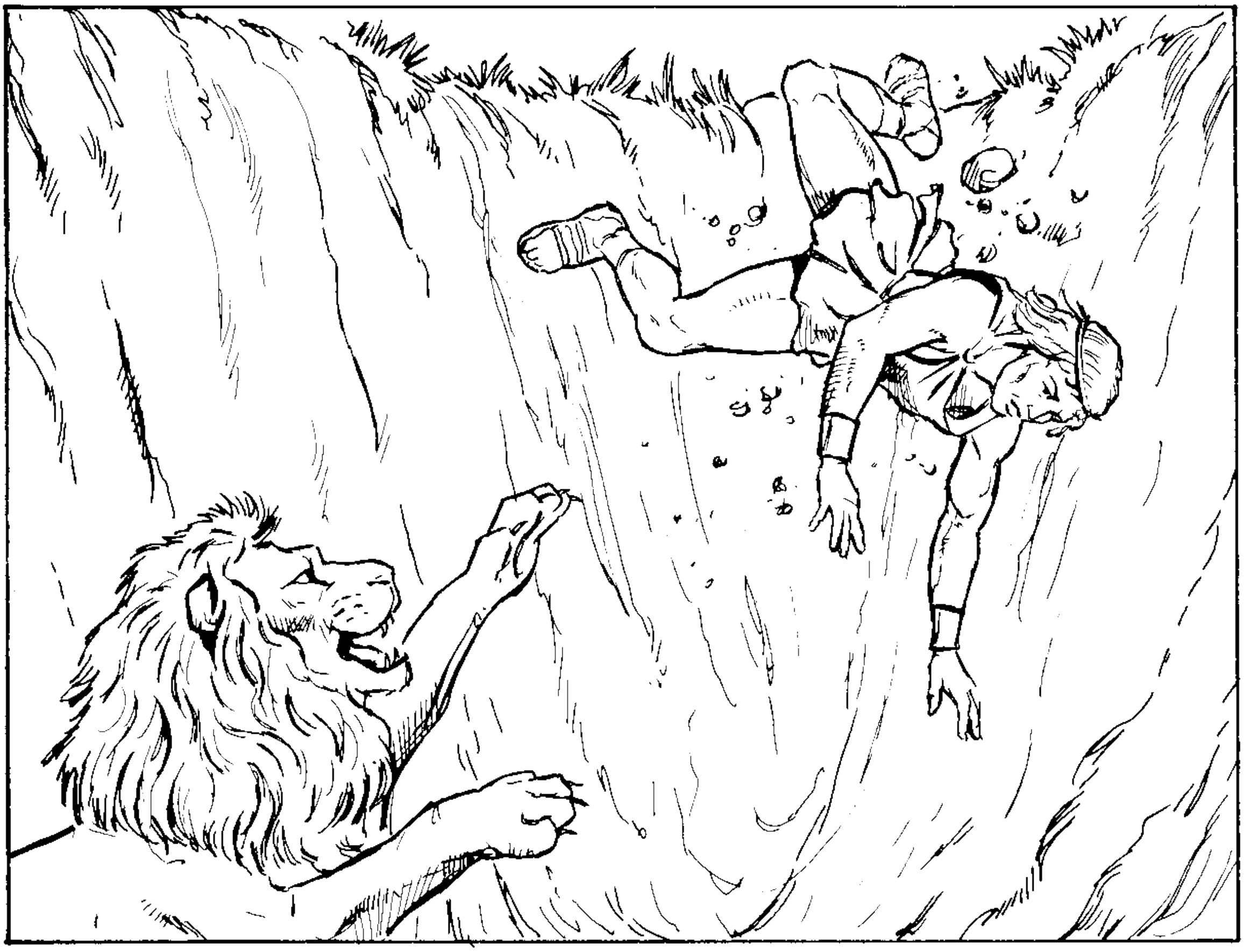


The young hero tumbled into the pit.

All who met him noticed he was a handsome boy, filled with liveliness and high spirits, devoted to his masters, and yet full of pride. He had blazing eyes, a full mouth, and lustrous, deep-toned skin. "A god must be his father!" remarked Tervalonios, one of his friends. "For no mere mortal could be so brave!" Indeed, there was nothing Hercules feared.

When he was eighteen years old, he went out to battle a raging lion that had been destroying Amphitryon's and the neighboring king's cattle. This lion lived nearby on Mount Helicon, where it hid when chased and killed all comers when cornered. But Hercules, after fifty nights of trailing it, was able to drive it into a pit he had dug. Proud of himself, Hercules fetched family and friends, and showed them his capture.

"Neither the country's soldiers, nor any of the country's bold hunters have been able to subdue this beast, but I, young Hercules, have done so!" Just as he said this, a mischievous goddess, Athene, who knew the remarkable career that Hercules was destined to have, appeared in the form of Tervalonios, and nudged Hercules so far off balance that the young hero tumbled into the pit. The lion was only too pleased to confront its trapper, and in an instant bounded at the dazed young man.

Amphitryon cried out in horror and was about to leap into the pit himself to aid his foster son, but he saw that the lion was getting the worst of this fight.

Hercules had managed a wrestling hold around the lion, and in an instant broke the beast's neck. Amphitryon and others were awestruck by the young man's power, and they cheered as Hercules crawled up a rope Athene had dropped to him. Still disguised as Tervalonios, Athene gazed at the son of Zeus, and he knew her to be an immortal. To bright-eyed Athene proud Hercules bowed his head.

Hercules was proving himself so bold and so great that the gods, especially his father Zeus, wanted him to be one of themselves—an immortal.

The only Olympian deity vocal in opposition to this was Hera, Zeus's wife. "A god!" she scoffed. "Hercules? The offspring of a mere mortal and a wayward, wandering god—*you,* my lord!"

For several moments Zeus frowned at this scolding. Hera, seeing his knitted brows, his cold eyes frosting her with ice, grew frightened, remembering his explosive temper, and said, "If you insist on his becoming a god, he must do a god's work!"

Not entirely at ease with his conscience in regard to his having fathered Hercules on a mortal, Zeus agreed to this proposal.

So originated the incredible, nearly impossible series of tasks, the Labors of Hercules.

That very day, Zeus and Hera appeared before Hercules, who, though respectful of their divinity, did not quake or tremble.

"If, and only if, you complete the labors King Eurystheus gives you," Hera told Hercules, "you may one day live among us on Mount Olympos."

Zeus said not a word but nodded at his son, and Hercules said, "I agree to these conditions, goddess."

Hera then flew off in her winged chariot to the land of Tiryns, where she encouraged King Eurystheus to do his worst, to request ten all-but-impossible duties of Hercules. She poisoned Eurystheus' mind against her husband's glorious son.

"This lad, though noble at first glance, is the wicked murderer of kings," she fibbed (for the "kings" she meant were rampaging lions). "He has no decent fear of man or beast! Should he survive your tasks, he will surely murder you and take your throne."

When the young hero appeared before Eurystheus, the king said to himself, "I am glad the great goddess Hera warned me, or I could not have resisted being kind to this son of Zeus. I had better make short work of him, for my own sake."

The first task he gave Hercules would, he thought, prove fatal. "Kill the Nemean lion," he ordered.

This lion was even larger and more bloodthirsty than the previous beast Hercules had captured and killed. No livestock was safe, for there were no

Hercules and the Nemean lion.

fences strong enough or high enough to keep the killer out of the farmers' pastures and yards. The Nemean lion was the offspring of two disgusting monsters, and no metal, stone or wooden weapon could do it any harm.

That very afternoon, Hercules leapt into its rocky lair, where it had gone to take a well-earned nap. The lion had filled up with a large breakfast: a farmer's entire household to start, and then eight cows, three pigs and a half-dozen goats. The shaggy-haired beast hardly lifted an eyebrow on seeing this intruder. It yawned as Hercules stood up behind a rock and shot arrow after arrow at it; the lion brushed aside the death-seeking missiles as carelessly as you or I would brush aside gnats or flies.

Seeing the folly of trying to injure it with arrows, Hercules went off and uprooted a thick olive tree. With his knife he hacked the tree into the shape of an enormous club. Then he returned to the entrance of the cave. He admired a foe as thick-skinned and hardy as himself, and he called out a challenge: "Claw to claw, jaw to jaw, let us fight all day, let us fight all night!"

The Nemean lion blinked once or twice, and Hercules, without waiting for an answer, jumped forward, his new club held high.

Have you watched a sleepy cat reach out and bat a ball of string? Just so, without rising, but lifting one heavy paw, the lion knocked away our mighty hero. And like a housecat, the lion, interested in a game, rose from its place to give chase. Hercules bounded to his feet, however, and gave a great roar as he hurled himself at the lion, this time with his bare hands.

The savage beast returned the man's roar with a thunderous one of its own, and it slashed at Hercules with its flesh-piercing claws. But Hercules blocked the lion's strike with his forearms, and grabbed hold of its wild mane. The foes now wrestled and tumbled to the ground, where dust rose like a cloud. Hercules, seeming a wild beast himself, sank his teeth into the lion's brawny shoulder, drawing blood and a roar of pain, all the while grasping the lion's neck with his massive hands. The lion rolled this way and that, falling heavily upon Hercules, who, though nearly crushed by the lion's weight, never let go of his chokehold. After two minutes, three minutes, four, the lion finally gave up the ghost, killed at the hands of a mere teenaged boy!

What a prize! thought Hercules, as he threw it over his shoulders and hiked back to Tiryns. The king, however, was so frightened by Hercules' bloody appearance, not to mention his surprising success, that he did not allow him to come into the palace. Eurystheus called to him from a high window and assigned him his second labor, another task he was sure would mean the end of mighty Hercules: "Go and destroy the hydra in Lerna."

Hercules answered, "That I will. But first I shall make myself a strong and handsome cloak." He lay the lion on the ground and, having learned his lesson that no metal, stone or wood could harm the lion, used its very own claws to

Finally his beautiful leather cloak was ready.

cut off its hide. For two weeks he stretched the lion skin on pegs under the sun, and then he tanned it well. Finally his beautiful leather cloak was ready. He wore the shaggy head of the lion as a cap and the rest of the flowing hide fell over his shoulders and down his back. Now he set off, with a friend and charioteer, Iolaos, for Lerna.

The hydra was a snaky, nine-headed creature, the head in the middle being immortal, thus unkillable. Like its half-brother, the Nemean lion, it feasted on cattle and spewed destruction over vast countrysides. When Hercules arrived in Lerna, no livestock ranged the fields, for the grasslands were burned over. He and Iolaos traveled in a chariot over the roads, searching for word of the hydra.

As evening came on, an old farmer, whose fruit trees had burned down at the breath of the monster, waved a burning branch to attract the attention of the chariot's occupants. Iolaos drove the team of horses across the blackened field and stopped beside the old man.

"Listen," said the man, whose name was Maxos, "if you and your comrade need something to keep you busy—I've seen you drive up and down these roads two or three times already—what about once and for all taking care of that firestorm who wrecked my land?"

"Lead us to the hydra!" commanded Hercules.

Maxos jumped out of his sandals at the young man's hard, ringing voice. "Me?—Some other time, perhaps. But, believe you me, young hero, I'm good at giving directions." The man drew a map for them in the dusty ground, and Hercules studied it, nodded to Iolaos, and they hopped into the chariot.

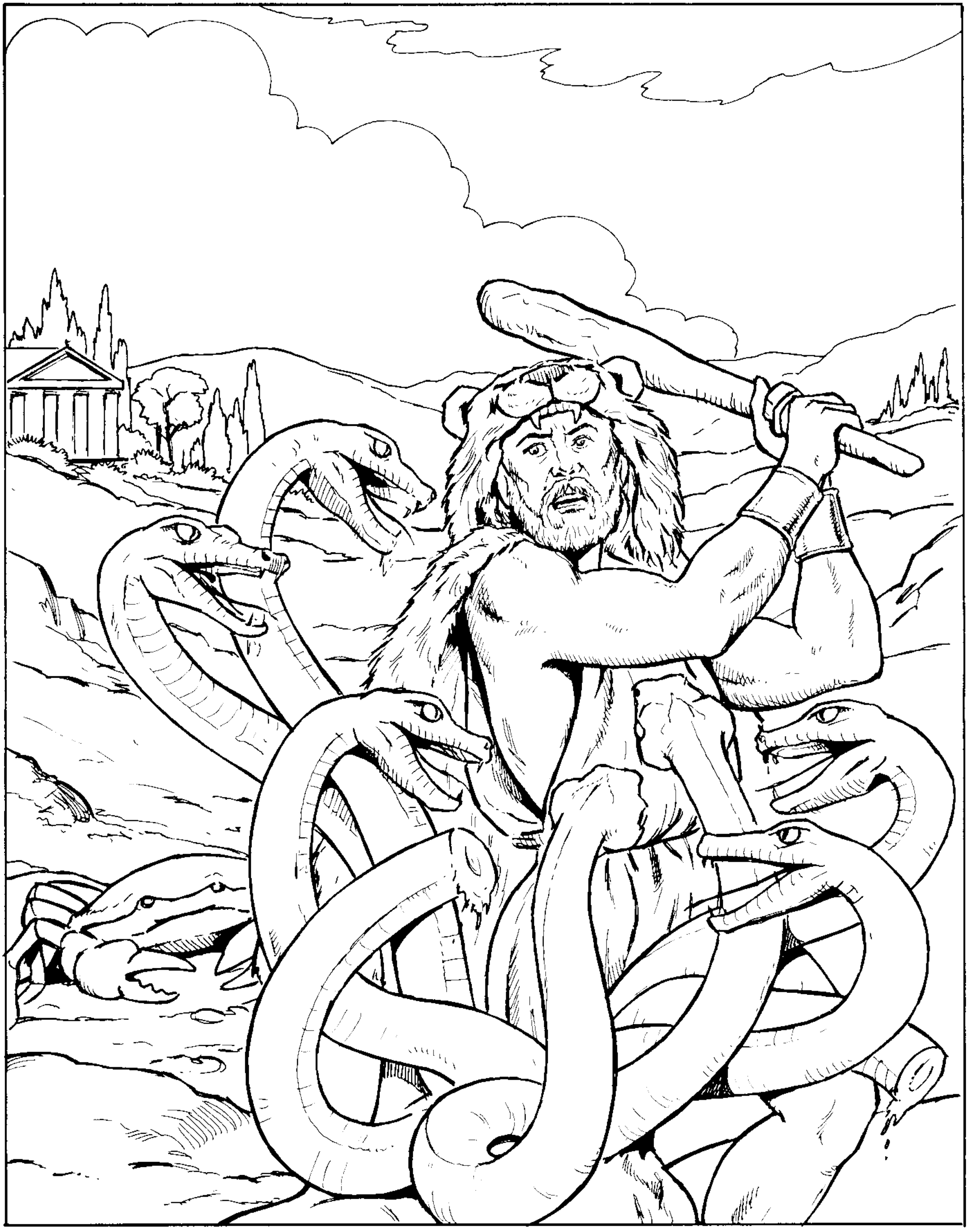
"You might need this to light your way," said the farmer. He handed Iolaos the blazing firebrand, and off they rode. They soon arrived at the entrance to a cave, home of twittering bats. In addition to the bats' high-pitched voices, the young men heard an eerie, snaky whistling: "Whewsh! Whewsh!"

"This is no time to sleep, you beast!" shouted Hercules. But the whooshing, huffing, foul hot breath continued, with no sign of the hydra itself.

"All right, then, lazy, lollygagging hydra, I have a message for you from the god of fire, Hephaestos!" And Hercules shot fire-tipped arrows into the cave until, finally, the hydra, angry at this nuisance, darted out at him.

Hercules could not help but be disgusted by its hungry, gaping mouths—teeth like razors champing for a taste of his body. He stood his ground, however, and swung his club, knocking off one head after another into the brackish cave. But for every terrible hydra head he clubbed off, two more immediately grew back! Within moments there were hundreds of hydra heads hissing at him and longing to devour him!

"Lead us to the hydra!" commanded Hercules.



Hercules and the hydra.

The creature flew, claws and legs akimbo, through the trees.

As if this multiplying problem weren't enough, a tremendous crab had come spidering over from the swamp nearby to lend assistance to its snake-headed comrade. The crab pinched hold of Hercules' sandaled right foot, and Hercules bellowed out in pain.

"Quick," called out Hercules, "listen, Iolaos—yow! (the crab pinched him harder)—take the torch—yow!" Zeus's great son paused a moment in his battle with the hydra to give the crab a swift kick; the creature flew, claws and legs akimbo, through the trees and back into its swamp.

This time as Hercules clubbed off the newly sprung hydra heads, Iolaos followed Hercules' directions and burned and sealed the necks before the heads could grow back. Finally only the unkillable last head was left, and Hercules, eying its blood-hungry forked tongue, returned to the chariot, retrieved from his pack a sword the swift god Hermes had given him, and approached again the dangerous, poised, hissing hydra, which arched its last neck, poison dripping from its daggerlike fangs.

The hydra bobbed, then struck for Hercules, and he, quicker, whipped round his sword with a swiftness worthy of Hermes himself, and slashed off the creature's hissing head. This head could not die, so to keep it from harming anyone else, Hercules and Iolaos climbed the hillside above the cave and created a land-

slide, burying the hydra deep within the dark cave. Its loathesome body he then cut up and fried over a fire. By this means he drew out the hydra's oily poison for future use on the tips of his death-dealing arrows.

When he returned to the king and told him of the short work he had made of the hydra, the king, scratching his bearded chin, shook his head and said, "You had help from Iolaos—and an aided labor is hardly a labor at all! So, Hercules," he said, "you get no credit for that one."

Hercules refused to argue with the sniveling, cheating king, and answered, "Rule as you will, but know that some day you must accept the consequences of your injustice."

"There shall be no consequences for anything I do, for sooner or later Death will take you into Hades!" shouted the frightened king. Eurystheus was more afraid than ever that if Hercules did not die in the course of his labors, the hero would return and destroy him. Eurystheus decided to pit Hercules against the goddess Artemis, and hope for the worst. "What I want now," he huffed, "are the antlers of the sacred Cerynean deer!"

This beautiful stag had golden antlers, and belonged to the goddess of hunting, Artemis, though even she, immortal that she was, had never captured it. Hercules dared not kill Artemis' deer, and so for one entire year he tracked it from here to there and to and fro, up mountainsides and down, across swift rivers, and even to the seashore. He finally wore it out with the chase. On a steep mountainside it lay down before him, unable to run any more. He hoisted it over his shoulders, and as he made his way through Artemis' sacred grove, the goddess appeared to him in the form of a wood nymph.

"What have you got there, Hercules?" she asked.

Her eyes and face were glowing, and he knew she was no ordinary nymph, but an Olympian goddess.

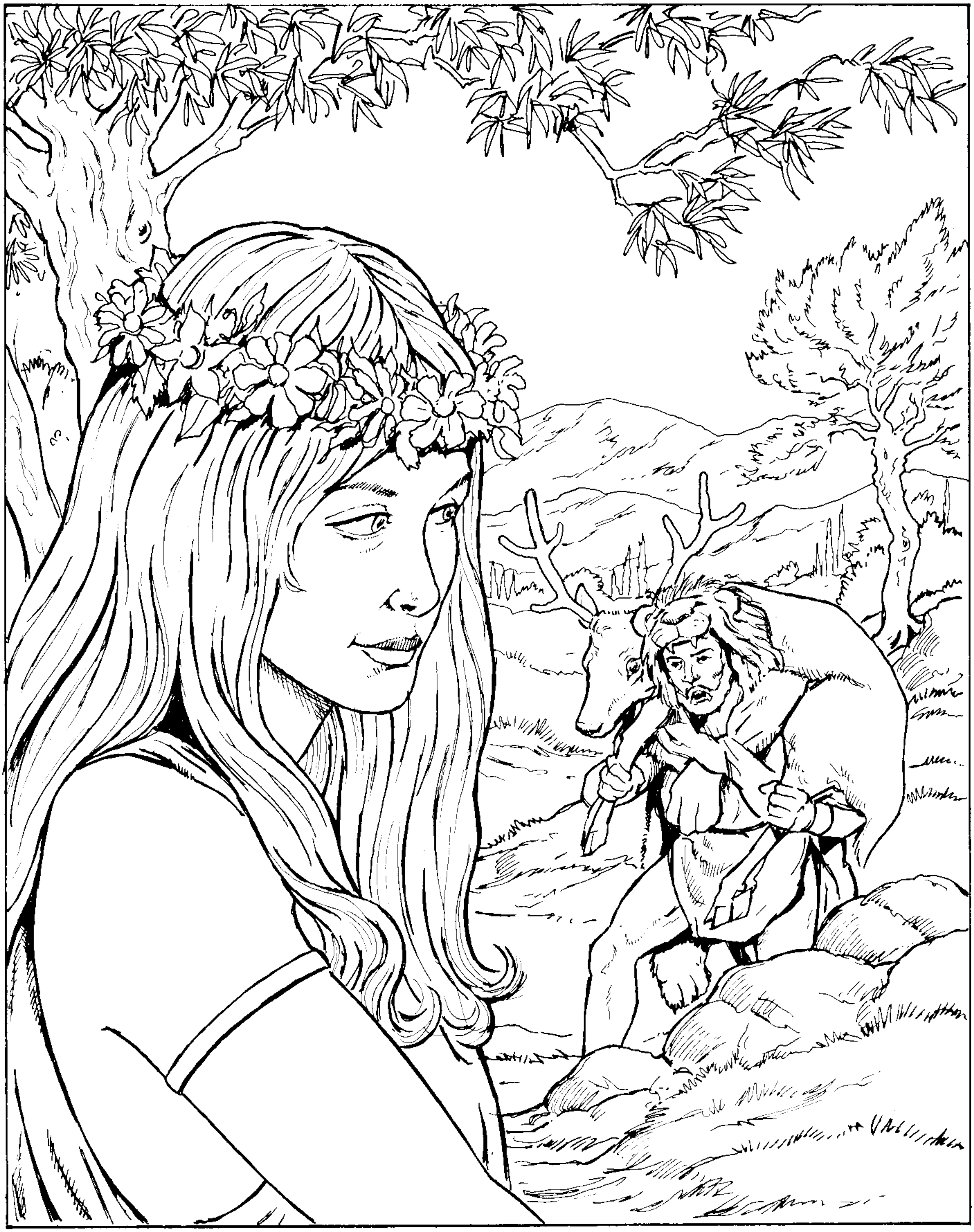
"Please, immortal Artemis," he said, "for I know who you are. No other goddess could match your grace and beauty."

She smiled, enjoying the soft words from the rugged man. "Well? What do you mean to do with my fleet-footed stag?"

"I'll show him to Eurystheus, the cowardly king of Tiryns. He asked for its antlers, and so I shall bring him antlers and animal at once. Should he wish for fatal trouble from you, he'll harm the stag—but I think he is wiser than that. When he has had his look at this prize, and refuses to harm it, lest he face death from you, I'll return it to your sacred grove."

"Very well," smiled Artemis. She forgave Hercules, as he had not hurt the stag, and she allowed him to bring it to the king.

"A clever ruse," remarked Eurystheus, stroking the stag's golden antlers. He understood that he could not have the antlers now without earning death from Artemis. "You have shown your wits this time, Hercules. But you'll need the



Hercules and the Cerynean deer.

assistance of a greater mind than yours for the next. After you return the deer to Artemis, your labor is to bring me the Erymanthian boar alive."

A wild, fierce boar is not easy to kill, but it is easier to kill one than to capture it alive. This, however, was what Hercules managed to do. After months of endless tracking, winter came, and he chased the boar into the deepest fields of newly fallen snow. The boar's massive, snorting head could barely rise above the snowbanks. Its lethal tusks were useless in fighting off the powdery fluff. Each new turn it took sank it deeper in the snow. The boar became so tired, it only puffed with relief when Hercules picked it up by its back legs and walked it, wheelbarrow-style, all the way back to Tiryns.

After dropping off the boar at Eurystheus' palace, Hercules gave himself a holiday and set out for an expedition with Jason and the Argonauts.

Hercules and the Erymanthian boar.

The nymph reached out her arms and pulled him in.

Jason and his crew of sailors were leaving on their great adventure in quest of the Golden Fleece. Before setting out from the coastal city of Iolcos, the Argonauts voted for Hercules to be their captain, but Hercules refused the honor, reminding the Argonauts that Jason was the only leader they and he needed. So Hercules and a dear handsome friend named Hylas accompanied the Argonauts.

It was on this long adventure, during a short stay in the land of Mysia, that grief befell Hercules and returned him to his labors.

While fetching fresh water from a stream, Hylas stared long and lovingly at the image of a beautiful woman just beneath the surface of the water. The image he saw belonged to a nymph, who admired the young man so much that she reached out her arms and pulled him in. Forever after would he happily live as the nymph's underwater partner.

With the Argonauts due to sail, Hercules desperately wandered through the forest calling Hylas' name. Though the Argonauts honored Hercules as a hero, when he refused to leave while he searched for his friend, they decided, with regret, that their journey must continue without him.

Have you seen a loyal hound in a panic, unable to find its master? It goes this way and that, desperate, and though a brave dog, it almost whimpers with the misery of not finding its master. Just so did Hercules search high and low for

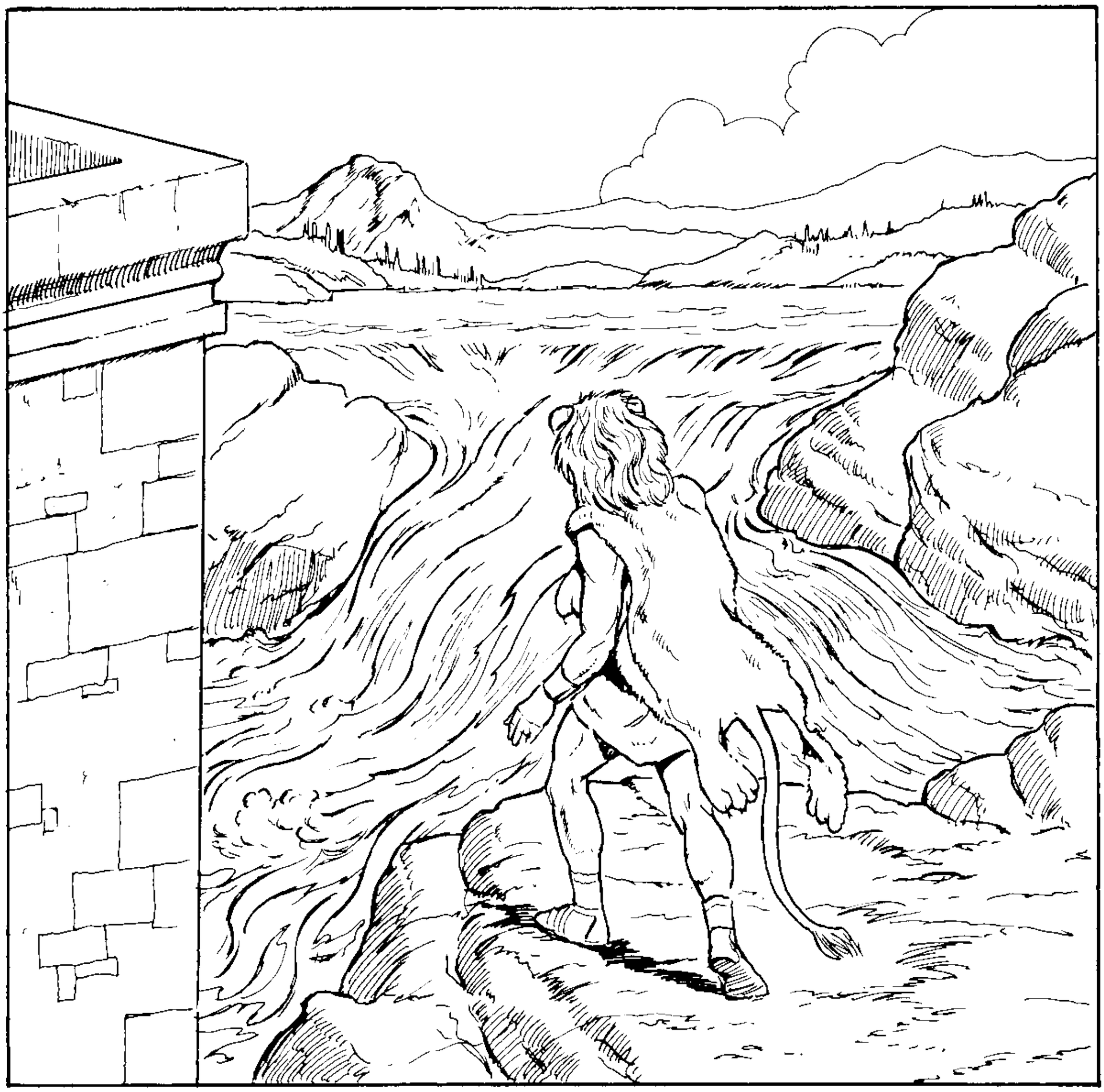
Hylas. Grieving, he finally gave up, knowing he would never again see his friend. He made his way back to Tiryns and asked Eurystheus for the next labor.

This task was the dirtiest ever performed. "Your fifth labor," said Eurystheus, "is to clean out the Augean stables in one single day." Augeas was a neighboring king, and his herds of cattle were hardy, healthy creatures, reproducing faster than he could contain them. Their stables, however, were so filled with dung they had become impassable.

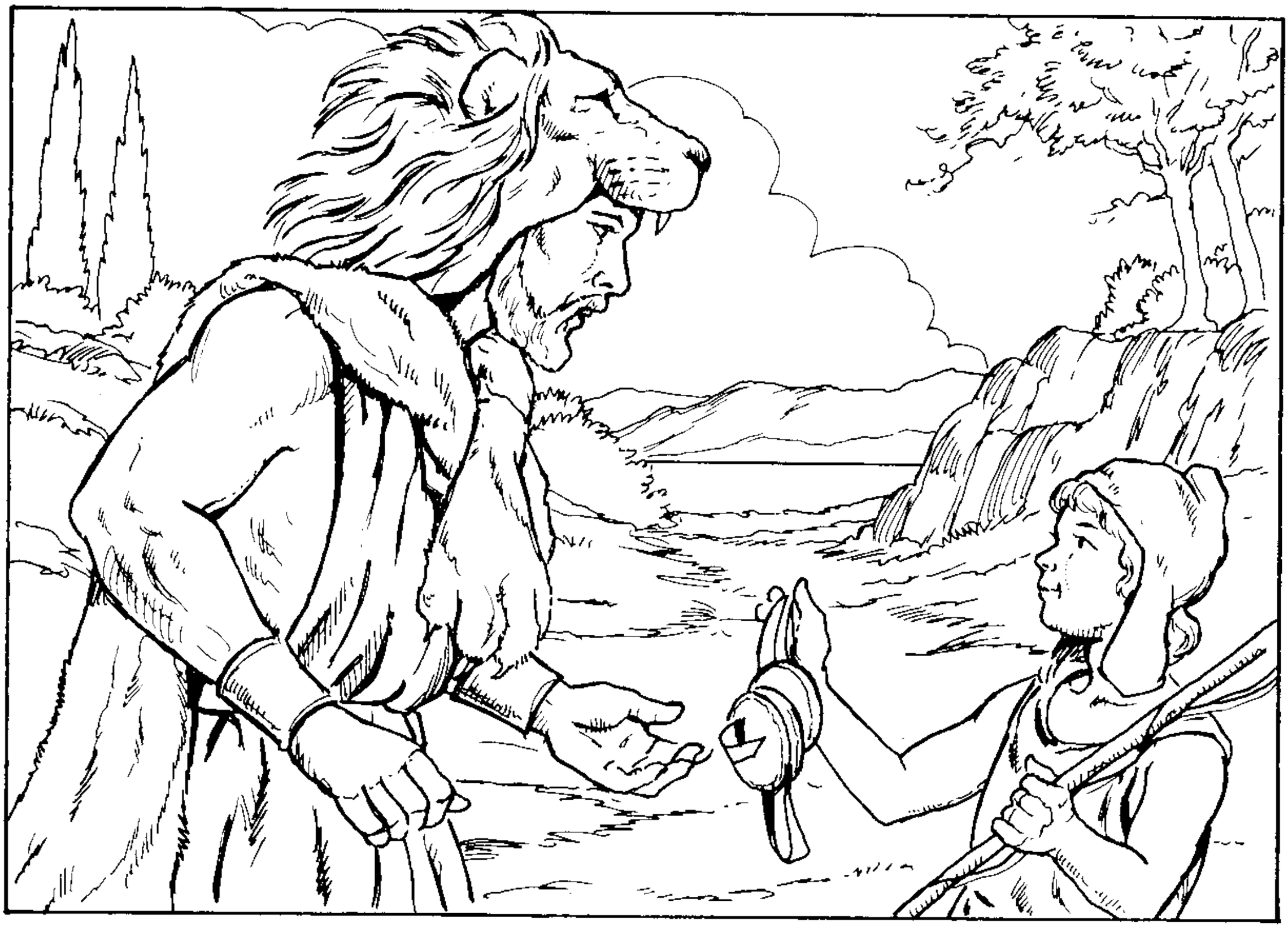
Hercules proceeded to the land of Augeas, where, holding his nose, he offered the king his services. "I'd like to clean out your stables today," he said.

"Help yourself," said Augeas. "Zeus knows I couldn't do it in a year! I'll grant you a tenth of my herds should you succeed."

Before the day was out, the mighty son of Zeus had diverted the paths of two rivers through the stables, and so washed all the filth away.



Hercules and the Augean stables.



Athene offered him a pair of brass castanets.

On his return to Tiryns, King Eurystheus declared, "I am not going to count that labor, for I have learned that you arranged to be paid for it."

"Augeas offered without my asking," said Hercules. "Besides which, he refused to honor his promise."

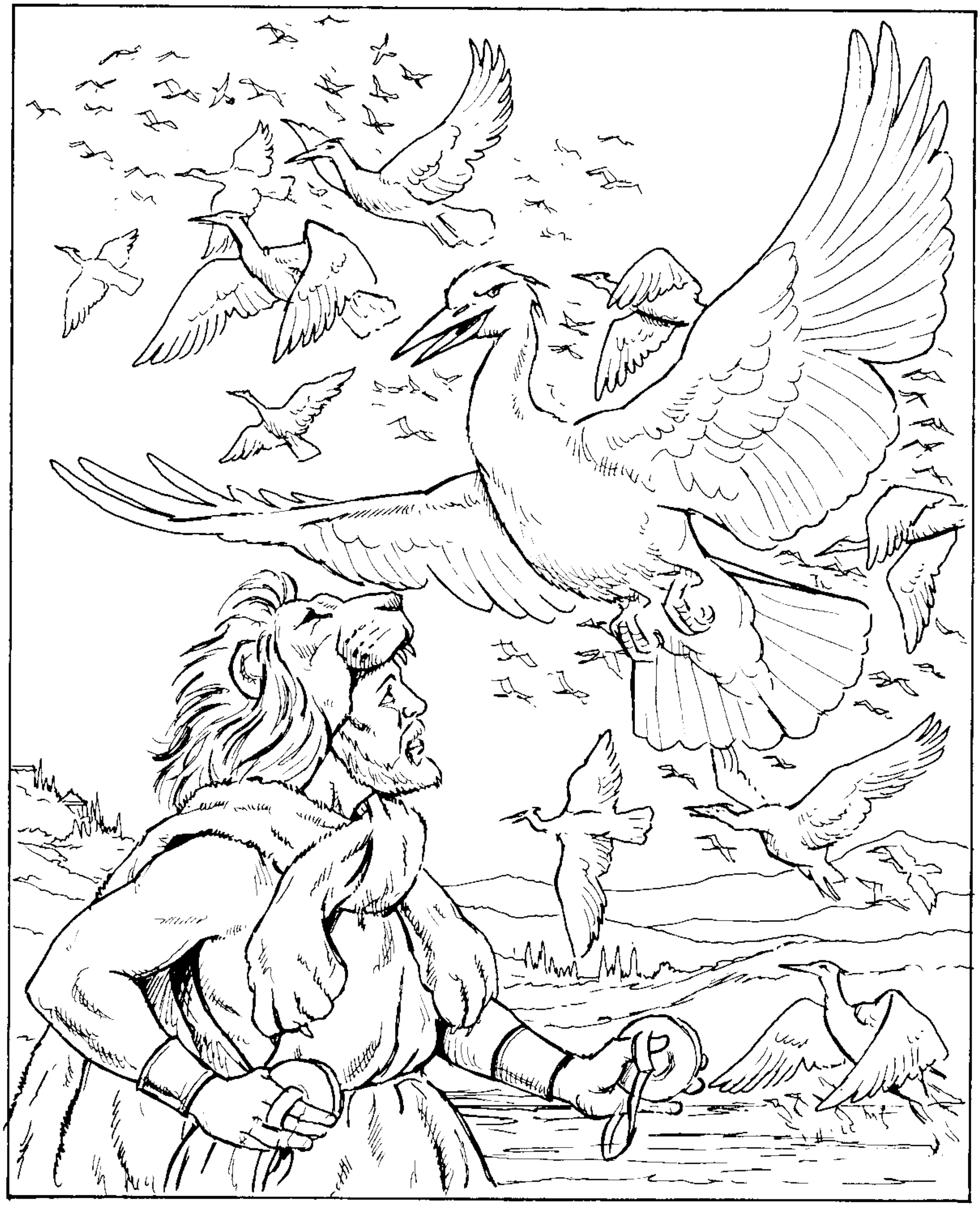
"No matter!" said Eurystheus, almost despairing of ever doing away with this great man, "and curse you for arguing with me! For your next task, go chase away the Stymphalian birds. You'll have your hands full with them, I tell you!"

Hercules went off to Lake Stymphalos, and was amazed by the number of tall, leggy birds there. They were as thick on the swampy edges of the lake as trees in a forest. They had long, sharp beaks that could stab a man through his chest and claws that could pierce his limbs. Even with a bow and arrows there were too many thousands for Hercules to kill, and he wondered if he would fail in this labor. But good, wise Athene, disguised as a boy, fishing pole over his shoulder, a cap on his head, offered him a pair of brass castanets.

"My father says thunder, though it causes no harm, is the most frightful weapon of all."

"Thank you, lad," said Hercules, "though I feel you are a divine god or goddess, so handsome are you, so gleaming are your eyes."

Hercules waded into the shallows of the lake and, like a dancer at a feast, clicked those castanets. What a painful, clanging din he raised! A stony silence,



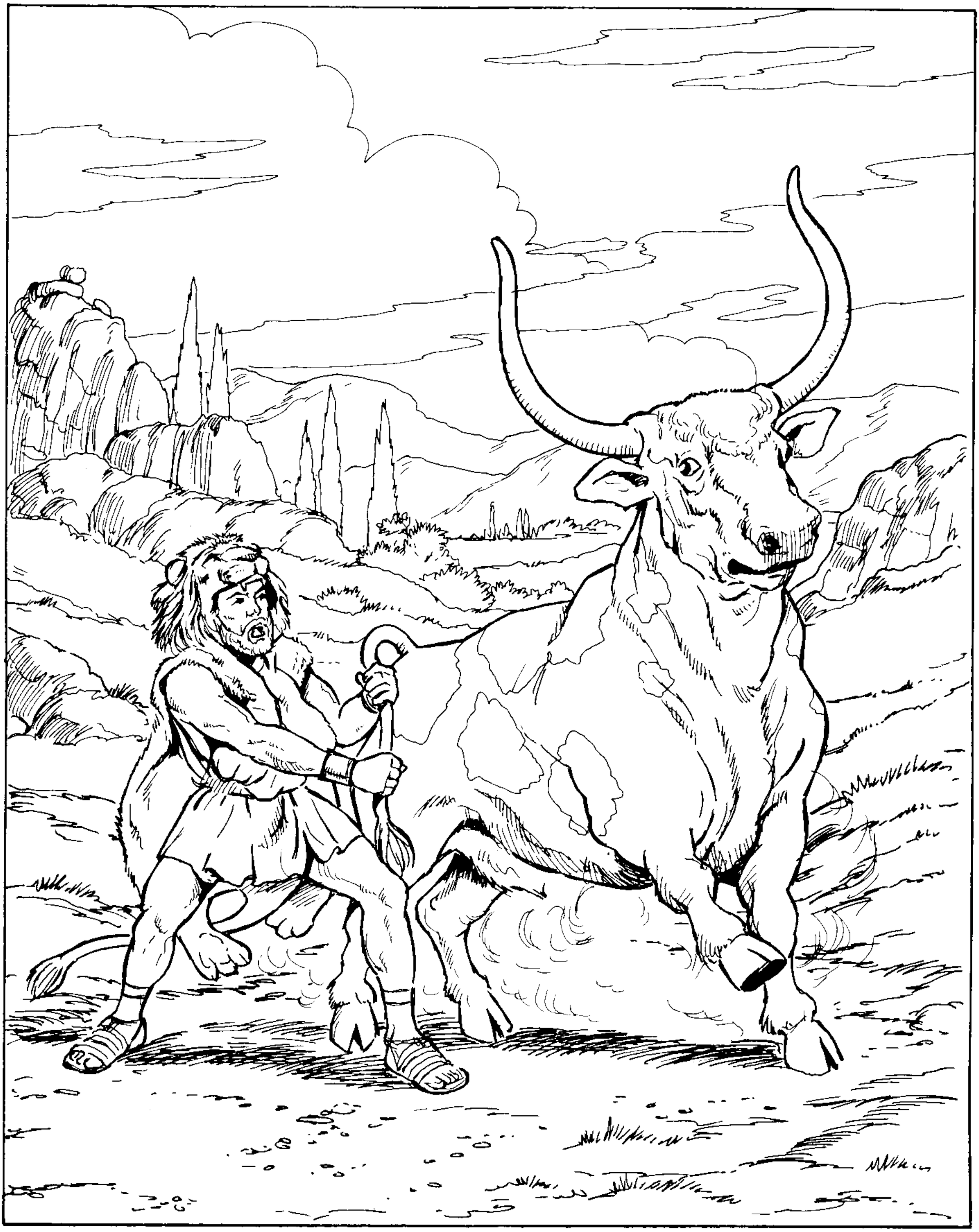
Hercules and the Stymphalian birds.

however, followed the first few thunderous knocks—a moment later, as Hercules again beat the castanets in rhythm, the birds screeched in fright and flapped their wings hastily and flew in droves up and away. So many were there that they shut out the sunlight for several minutes. Hercules roared with laughter all the while, and kept up the terrible brass din until they were all gone.

He prayed thankfulness to the gods and then returned to Tiryns.

"What cannot you do?" wondered Eurystheus.

"I do not know," replied Hercules, "since I have never failed."



Hercules and the Cretan bull.

The king should have admired Hercules; instead, out of fear that Hercules would eventually kill him, he devised a new plan to do away with him: "Bring me the savage Cretan bull alive. You might know that his monstrous offspring, the Minotaur, half-bull, half-human, ate up all who visited its pen within the winding, confusing maze of a labyrinth."

"So I have heard," said Hercules. He sailed across the sea to the island of Crete.

This Cretan bull had mated with Pasiphae, the queen of Crete, producing a creature more stubborn than any bull and more ferocious than any man. The bull spent his days now wandering the hills above the city, and then rushing down into the fields of farmers, goring their cattle and destroying with powerful kicks their lovely walled fields.

When Hercules, lightly dressed, carrying only his club and accompanied by Iolaos, started climbing up a mountain trail to the bull's usual pasturage, he passed a crude signboard depicting a fire-breathing, bloody-horned bull. Hercules told Iolaos to wait by the sign and that he would shortly return.

The bull was asleep on the trail, and at first Hercules mistook it for a tremendous black boulder. Then, recognizing it for what it was, instead of turning and running as most men would do, or sneaking up on it and lassoing its feet, as only the bravest men would think of doing, Hercules walked snortingly up to the heaving, sighing, dozing bull and grabbed it by its fly-swishing tail.

The bull leaped as if it had been stung. But buck as it would, it could not shake away Hercules. Humbled, the Cretan bull followed Hercules and Iolaos down the mountainside, through the city, and onto the warrior's ship and sailed with him for Tiryns.

On seeing it, Eurystheus screamed in fright.

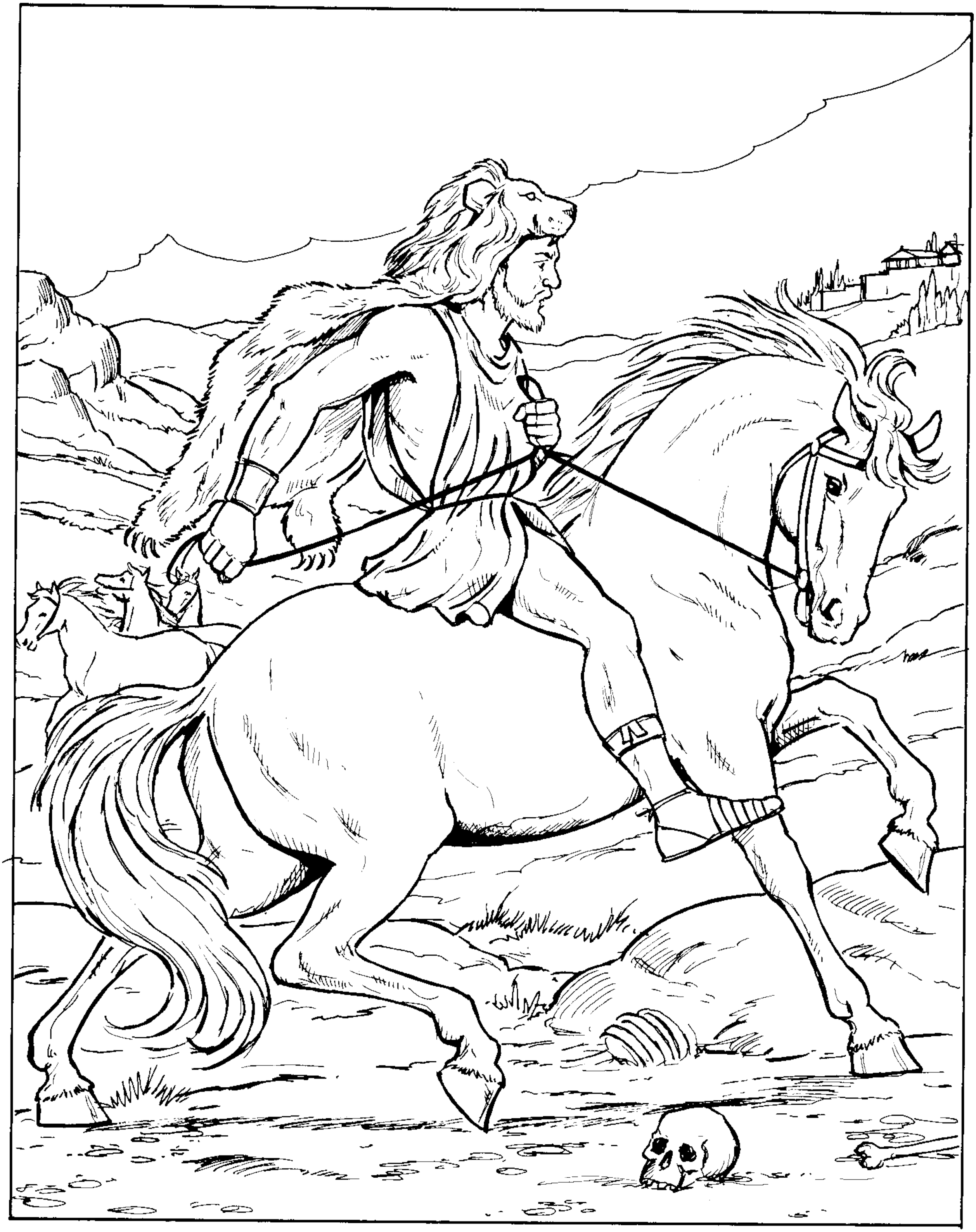
"Are you satisfied?" asked the son of Zeus.

"No! Get it out of here!" said Eurystheus.

Hercules bowed, and then released the bull. The bull bucked and stormed, kicking over pedestals and statues within the king's palace before running crazily through the countryside.

"The next labor, Hercules," said the king, pausing a long while, trying to catch his breath, "is . . . let us see." Thinking of tasks for Hercules brought trouble! "Your task is to bring me the man-eating (and, I hope, Hercules-eating) horses of Diomedes." These four neighing beasts were so fierce they ate humans as hungrily as other horses eat apples.

Hercules and Iolaos went off to Thrace to find these horses. Hercules lassoed them and bridled their man-hungry mouths. And then he rode them and rode them, until they were as gentle as kittens. By the time he sailed away with them they were eating grain out of his hand and coming at his call. He soon after delivered Diomedes' horses to Eurystheus.



Hercules and the horses of Diomedes.

The ninth labor seemed more difficult.

"I want the Amazon Hippolyte's fabulous belt," said Eurystheus. Queen Hippolyte had received this belt from the war god Ares because she was the greatest warrior in the battle-loving nation of women.

When Hercules arrived in her territory, he went to her in a humble fashion, simply telling her who he was and what he needed. Hippolyte was so pleased to meet the famous Hercules (his labors had become renowned) that she was delighted to make a gift to him of her belt. As she unfastened it, goddess Hera, having disguised herself as an Amazon warrior, shouted out, "It's a trick! He'll kill her!" Hippolyte's warriors, already jealous of their queen's kind looks on Hercules, attacked the hero.

In the battle, all was confusion, and unhappy Hercules, defending himself from Amazonian slings and arrows, swung out his club at a stone flung toward him; in his follow-through, he struck poor Hippolyte. In that instant she died, and her Amazons, groaning with grief, gave up the fight. Hercules sorrowfully took the belt she had offered him and returned with it to Tiryns. Eurystheus had no use for a warrior's belt, but it was beautiful and he passed it along to his pretty daughter.

The king had come to expect Hercules' survival, and so gave him a task that would take some time. "Bring me the cattle of Geryon," said King Eurystheus, "and, should you be fated to die in the attempt, good riddance!"

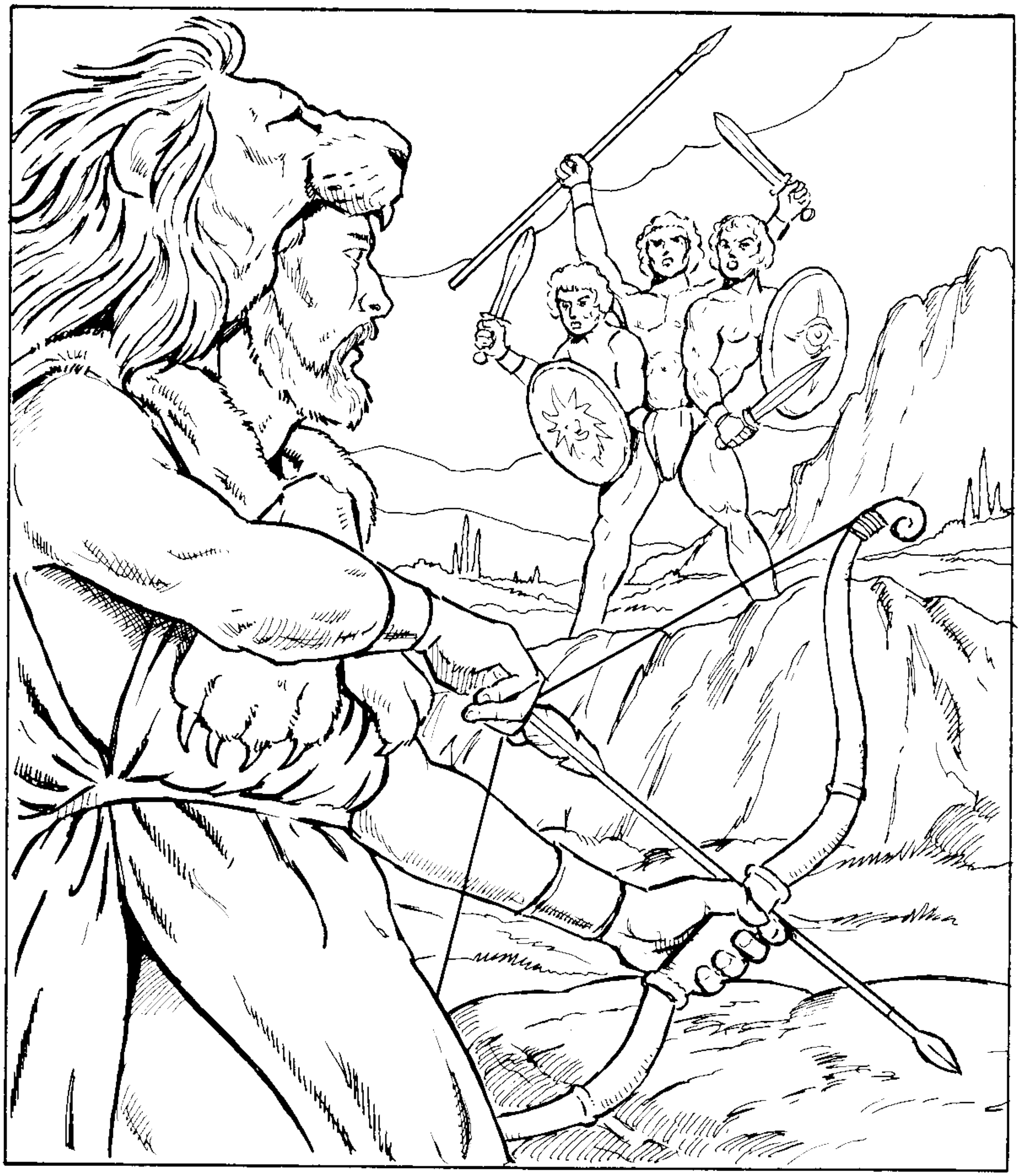
"With Zeus on my side, you won't have seen the last of me," replied Hercules.

Our hero set out and sailed for the island of Erytheia, where he met up with the cowherd Geryon, a three-bodied man, joined together at the waist. His watchdog was the two-headed Orthros. The double-barking canine bounded toward Hercules the way a watchdog would attack a thief, but the son of Zeus took one step back and then swung his carved club and knocked the brains out of one dog head, and then swung again and crushed the brains out of the other. Geryon, crying out in horror at the destruction of his beloved animal, rushed at Hercules, who did not know which of the three parts of Geryon to kill first. He stepped back and shot a poisoned arrow at Geryon's middle, killing him altogether, for the hydra's poison was deadly. Hercules then rounded up Geryon's cattle, and led them on a long, wearying drive across many foreign kingdoms before reaching Tiryns.

Hercules had performed ten labors, but Eurystheus was not willing to count Hercules' destruction of the hydra, since he had had Iolaos' help, or the clean-up of the Augean stables, for which he had been promised payment. Thus he insisted on two more labors, and Hercules, though angry and vowing vengeance, agreed to do them.

The eleventh labor was a harmless-sounding one: "Pick me a few of the splendid golden apples of the Hesperides."

Hercules and the belt of Hippolyte.



Hercules and the cattle of Geryon.

"As you like," said Hercules, "but where are they?"

Eurystheus smiled, saying, "I have no idea. Part of your task will be to find out."

So Hercules set out, aimless and praying to the gods for guidance. Athene herself descended from Olympos and told the hero, "The Hesperides are lovely nymphs who tend the golden apple tree, which is guarded from intruders by a loathsome, lava-spouting snake."

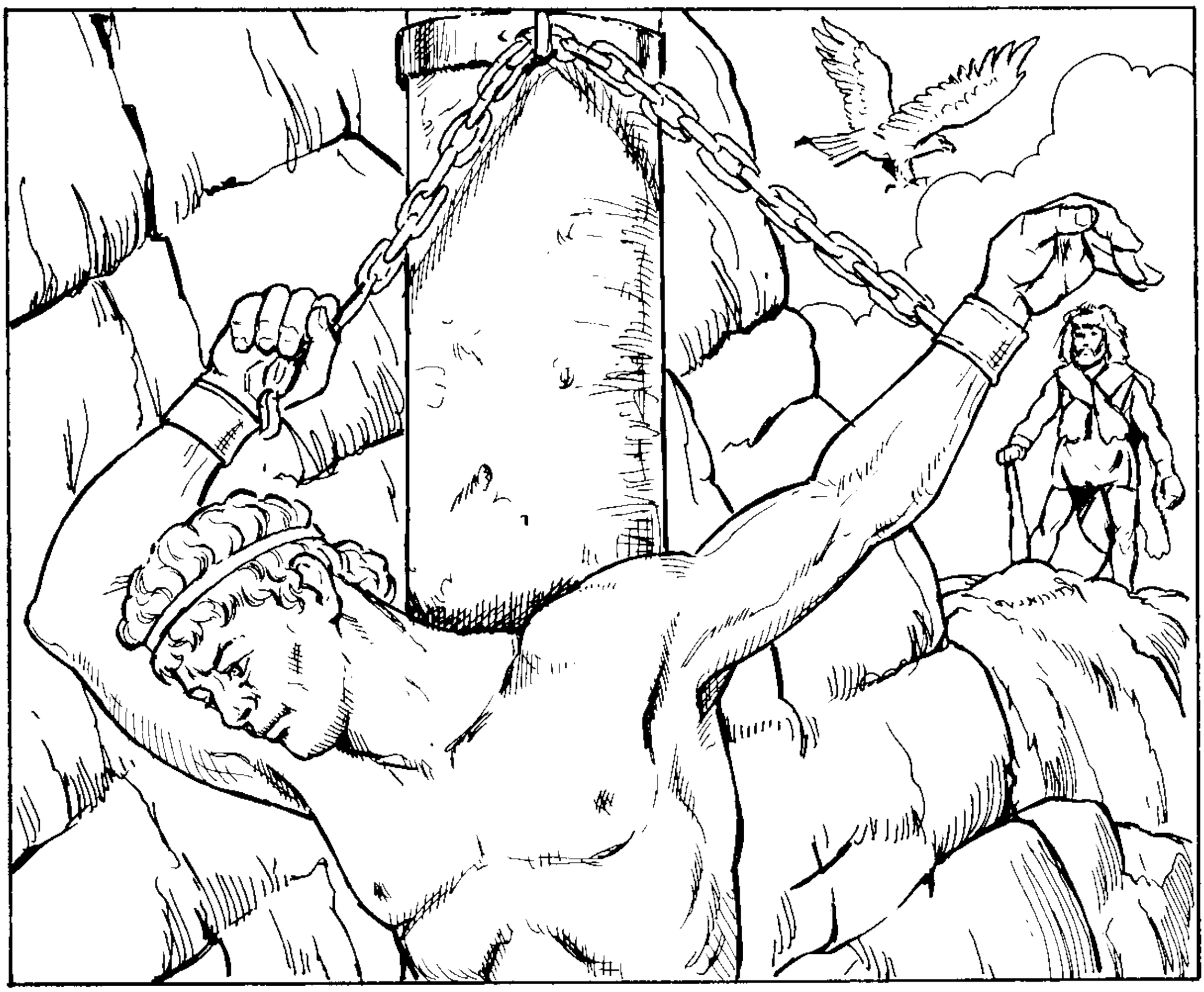
"But where will I find them?"

"At night, look to the west, where you can see the Hesperides shining as stars. Below them you will see the tree. But be careful."

On his long journey westward Hercules came upon Prometheus. This Titan, a child of the Sky and Earth, had brought fire to mankind. The gods resented Prometheus' gift, for fire, they believed, belonged to gods, not humans. The lord of the gods punished Prometheus by tying him against a cliff to be pecked at every day by a bloodthirsty eagle. Hercules was disgusted by his father's treatment of mankind's hero, and so he prayed to Zeus, asking him to forgive Prometheus. Zeus answered him, "You may slay the eagle and cut off the bands by which Prometheus is tied. My admiration for you outweighs my disgust with him."

Hercules awaited the eagle's daily arrival while crouched behind a rock, and when it came down like a screeching arrow, he rushed out at it, and slew it as simply as a butcher would a chicken. He then cut through Prometheus' bands, and Prometheus, so weak and sick from his ages-long torture, sank into Hercules' arms.

"My friend," he gasped, "I know your quest, but before you seek the golden apples, let me give you a gift of warning: do not try to pick the fruit yourself. The dragon would destroy you, just as it would attack even a god! Go to my brother Atlas at the western edge of the world. There, under the Hesperides,



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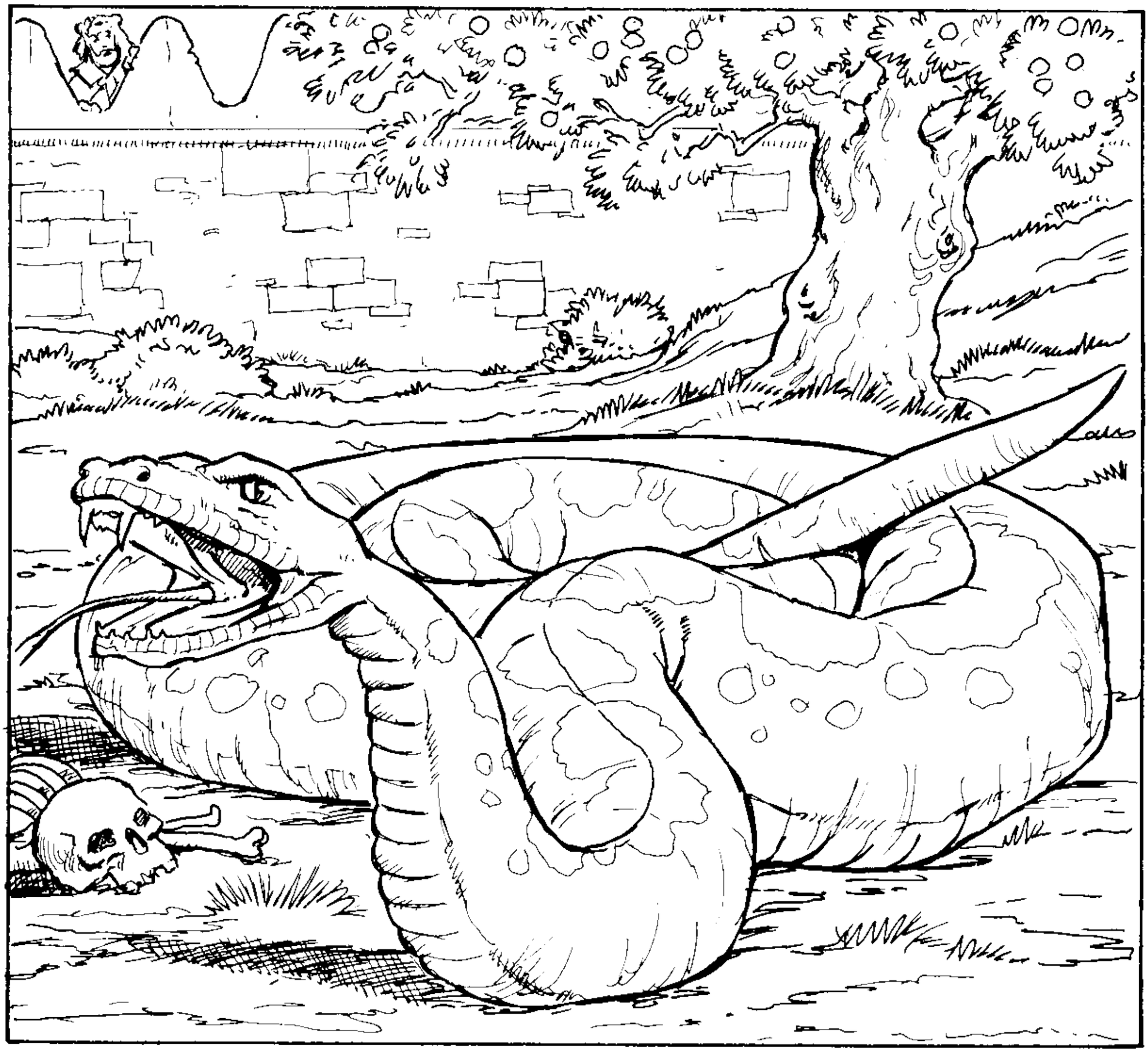


Hercules peeked over the high wall.

with the weight of the sky on his shoulders, he stands. He keeps the sky from crushing the earth, ever since Zeus assigned him this task. It is Atlas' punishment for having fought against Zeus in the fateful war between Cronos and Zeus."

Mighty Hercules journeyed many more weeks before he came to the edge of the world, and once there, he found the Titan.

"I am Hercules," our hero announced.

Atlas nodded.

"Prometheus told me you might know where the golden apples are."

Atlas, his voice deep and rough with strain, said, "Yes. Yes, I do. They're just over there in the lovely nymphs' garden. Help yourself."

Hercules peeked over the high wall of the paradise and saw a huge and hungry snake the size of a dragon guarding the apple tree. He thought to himself, then replied, "Perhaps, invincible Atlas, you would like a rest from your duty? I could hold up the sky for you while you went in and picked some apples for me."

Hercules and the golden apples of the Hesperides.

Atlas frowned, then found himself nodding, and agreed.

Hercules took the sky on his shoulders, and Atlas stood upright and walked to the paradise wall and hopped over. When he returned with the apples—Atlas carried a charm that lulled the snake to sleep—and saw Hercules stooping and straining beneath the sky's weight, he realized just how glad he was to have been relieved of that tedious task.

He saw this as a chance to pass off his duty onto Zeus's son's shoulders. "My friend," he said, "you are doing such a good job in my stead, I will let you go on doing it."

Hercules understood Atlas' trick. "Very well, Titan. It's no trouble to me. But wait a moment. Before you go, would you mind holding the sky while I find a pillow to lay across my head and shoulders?"

Atlas, though the brother of clever Prometheus, wasn't so smart. He set down the apples he had fetched for Hercules and laughed, saying proudly, "I

myself have never needed a cushion! I pity you, so, all right, let me lend you a hand."

As Hercules stepped out from underneath the sky, Atlas shouldered the burden. He watched Hercules pick up the apples. "But you're staying here!" cried Atlas. "You won't need those."

"Farewell, Atlas!" said Hercules, going on his way.

Atlas stamped his foot, but he couldn't escape the duty of keeping the sky off the earth or do anything about Hercules' double-crossing trick.

The final labor that Eurystheus gave Hercules was to fetch the hideous watchdog of Hades, three-headed Cerberos. Goddess Athene guided Hercules to the underworld entrance, past fearsome Cerberos, and then wished him luck. "You must rely on your wits, now, Hercules. Your mind must precede your brute strength." The hero wandered down the winding cave into the dusky land of the dead, where he saw the spirits of those who had lived; they were squeaking like bats, and twitchily flitting about. Hercules shuddered and prayed to the gods on Olympos for their protection. Then he proceeded until he found his way to the throne room of Hades himself.

He found his way to the throne room of Hades himself.

Hercules and Cerberos.

"Well, well, well," laughed Hades, who did not have a warm laugh at all. "My brother Zeus's son has come to pay his respects to his uncle."

"All respect the dead, Hades, for all fear death, though it gives our bodies peace."

"Yes, yes, so it is said," answered Hades. "What is it you want?"

"I ask for permission to take your dog for a walk to Tiryns."

Again Hades laughed his cold, unfriendly laugh, and said, "Go right ahead, nephew, by all means. But use no club or other weapon to make him follow you."

Hercules pulled his lion-skin cloak tight over his body and crept up on the keen-eyed dog. Just as the dog's heads began to bark in warning, Hercules sprang like a wicked beast and wrestled the ferocious dog until it pantingly gave up the fight and rolled over, showing its belly, and licked Hercules' masterful hands. Cerberos followed Hercules away from the gloomy underworld to King Eurystheus. The king shuddered at the sight of the dog he would see all too soon at the gates of Hades.

"Take him away!" cried Eurystheus. "And leave me alone. You have performed your labors. Now go, Hercules, and never let me see you again!"

Hercules laughed at the terrified king who had so provoked him, but he said

and did nothing to him for now, and calling "Here, boy!" led the bewildered dog back home to the underworld.

The mighty son of Zeus had succeeded in his labors, earning the right to live forever among the Olympian gods.

But for now he continued to live as a hero among men.

He eventually married Deianira, the daughter of King Oeneus. As they traveled one day, on their quest for a new home, a wide river barred their path. Surely Hercules could swim against the strong currents, but Deianira could not. They stood on the riverbank pondering what course to take.

Just then Nessos, a centaur, one of those creatures who are men to the waist and horses below, came floating by on a small raft.

"Need a lift?" he asked, winking unpleasantly at Deianira. He knew who mighty Hercules was, for Hercules had done battle with Nessos' clansmen many years before.

"If you make room and give her passage on your raft, I will pay you and swim across on my own," declared Hercules.

"A fine idea," said Nessos, his eyes flashing.

Hercules dove into the swift river and set out against the heavy current. Nessos, however, pretending that the long pole with which he pushed the raft could not reach the river bottom, let the raft float quickly downstream. In no time at all, he would have kidnapped Deianira, bringing her to his lair in the mountains, and he laughed to himself and then out loud.

Hercules, meanwhile, having made his way across the river, looked back and could hardly see the centaur's raft. He called out in his tremendous voice, "Where are you going with my wife?"

In response, Nessos cackled, and waved good-bye. The centaur was nearly at a bend in the river, after which point Hercules would not have found him among the numerous forks the fast river took. Hercules strung his bow, pulled out an arrow and let it fly!

The hydra-poisoned arrow struck the centaur in the chest; he fell wounded, and Deianira directed the raft to the river's edge.

"Forgive me," said Nessos to Deianira.

"How can I?" said she.

"Listen," Nessos continued, "and take this wool." The dying centaur took from a bag about his neck some wool, which unbeknownst to Deianira, he smeared with his own newly poisoned blood. "Weave from it a robe for your husband. Once he wears it, he will never leave you for another adventure."

Deianira, though doubting the cunning centaur, took the wool and hid it away.

Nessos died before Hercules reached the raft. The married couple now continued on their way.

Forever after would Hercules live among the gods.

It was soon after that Hercules settled Deianira in a home and went off on his own new adventures. After a month he sent back a messenger to Deianira to ask for a ceremonial robe. She, remembering Nessos' gift, wove the wool into a long, beautiful white garment for her husband, with which the messenger returned to Hercules.

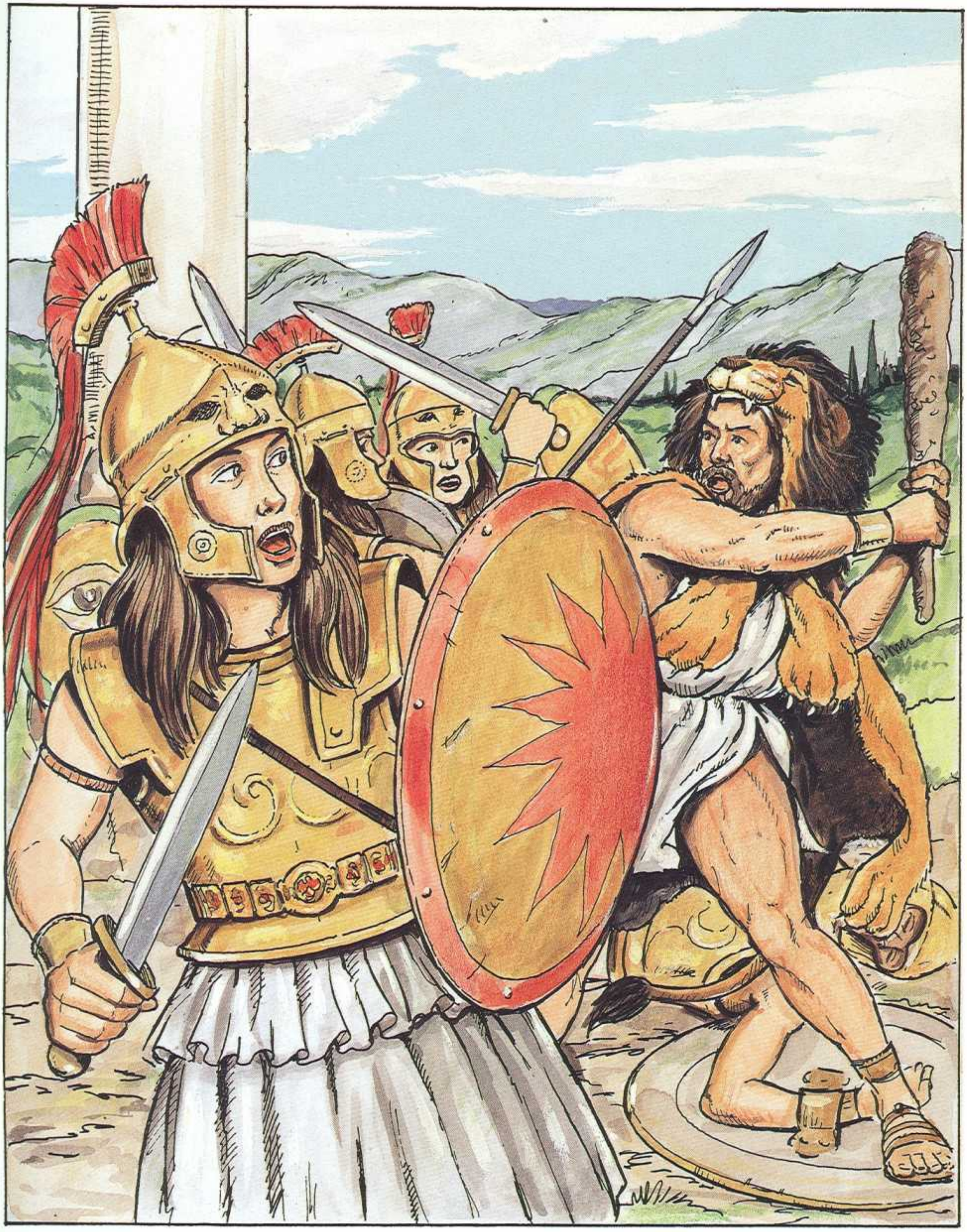
As the messenger held the robe up for him to see, Hercules admired his wife's fine work. He needed the robe to wear during the ceremony dedicating a newly built altar to his father Zeus.

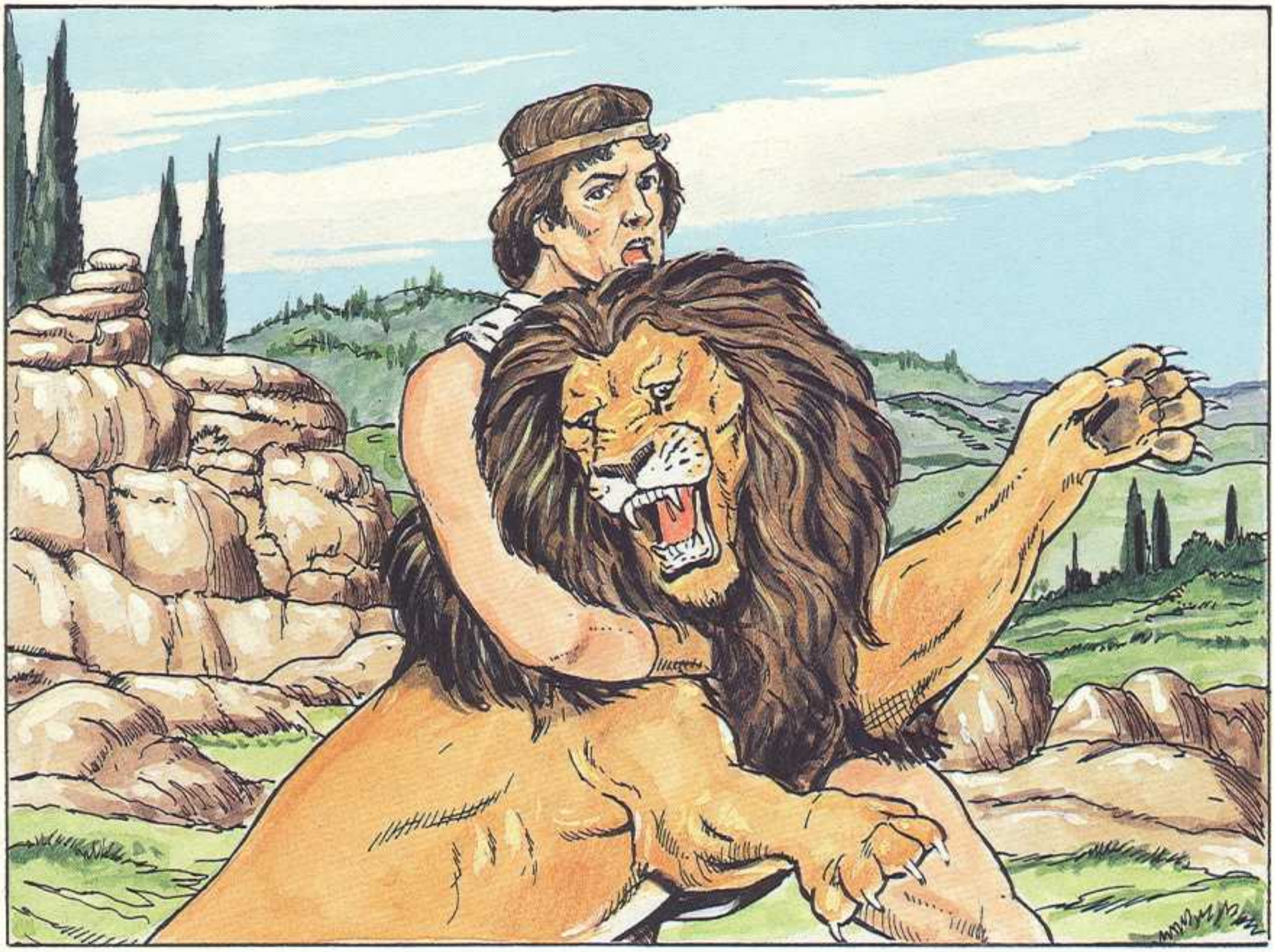
Hercules let the messenger drape the garment over his shoulders. Within moments after he took his place in front of the fiery altar, the poison within the robe melted and dripped like hot wax onto the hero! Hercules roared in pain, and yet when he tried to tear off the robe, it dissolved into him, eating away at his flesh.

Lord Zeus saw that this was the end of Hercules' mortal life, and so he gathered dense, purifying clouds over the suffering hero.

At the sound of a deafening thunderclap, Hercules disappeared off the face of the earth and arrived on Mount Olympos. He was indeed immortal!

Even Hera, his old enemy, now admired him. She patted him on the shoulder, and kissed him, and asked him to marry Hebe, one of her daughters, the goddess of youth. Forever after would Hercules live on Mount Olympos among the gods!





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